
Eastern North Carolina: A Diverse Collection of People and Places

Birthplace of aviation, pork barbecue with vinegar and pepper sauce, and even, arguably, the dance step known as the shag, Eastern North Carolina is far more than a flat place in the landscape on the way to the coast. Indeed, the 41 counties of the North Carolina Coastal Plain present a diverse collection. The region plays host to most of the state's tobacco crop, a goodly portion of its pork industry, and nearly all of the state's military establishment.

Small towns from Bear Grass to Burgaw support a rural lifestyle where time ticks by at a slightly slower pace, yet the East also is home to the second most densely populated county in the state—New Hanover. The county seat is Wilmington, which also happens to be the capital of the state's movie industry. There, a tourist can stroll the promenade along the Cape Fear River, tour historic homes, and even find a latte worth licking her lips over. And on certain summer evenings, she can watch the rockets' red

glare bursting over the Battleship North Carolina, berthed in safe harbor on the Cape Fear River.

The battleship is just one of a broad range of state historic sites in the East, which lays legitimate claim to a number of firsts for both the state and nation. The first English settlers in the New World attempted to establish a colony on Roanoke Island in Dare County, an effort commemorated in the outdoor drama, "The Lost Colony." North Carolina's colonial capital was located in the Eastern North Carolina town of New Bern, and at the turn of the 20th Century, the Wright brothers chose the windswept Outer Banks to launch man's first flight.

Less well known but still significant are the many stops along the Historic Albemarle Tour, which features a number of state historic sites and towns in close proximity to the massive Albemarle Sound. These include the Newbold-White House, dating to 1730 and the oldest

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standing brick house in the state, and Hope Plantation in Windsor, site of two National Register historic homes: the 1803 home of Governor David Stone and the 1763 King Bazemore House. But the most sobering stop on the tour may be Somerset Plantation, dating to 1860 and one of only four large-scale plantations in North Carolina. There, some 300 slaves worked the fields of Washington County and the descendants of those slaves still gather for reunions.

The plantation's prominence on the tour supports the notion that Easterners are unusually open. Indeed, they do not hide some of the uglier aspects of the region's past. Blackbeard the Pirate, for example, committed his last acts of barbarism off the coast of Ocracoke Island. His legend generates intense interest and produces sizable souvenir sales. More contemporary and genteel celebrities include big band leader Kay Kyser from Rocky Mount, Andy Griffith, who got his start at the outdoor drama "The Lost Colony" in Manteo, the late baseball pitching great Jim "Catfish" Hunter, who hailed from Perquimans County in the northeast, and the Perry brothers, Jim and Gaylord, two major league pitchers who hailed from Williamston.

As for its economy, the region remains more dependent on agriculture than the rest of the state. While well known for tobacco, hogs, poultry, and forest products, the East also depends heavily on peanuts, corn, and soybeans. Bell peppers, carrots, and cucumbers are heavily produced, as are fruits, including blueberries, strawberries, and watermelons. Indeed, Eastern North Carolina could be considered the state's farm belt, as most of the state's agricultural commodities are produced in its 41 counties. Among these commodities are forests used to produce a vast array of building materials and paper products.

Yet no crop has symbolized the region so much as the golden leaf, more formally known as brightleaf tobacco. The fact that a very valuable crop can be raised on a relatively small patch of land, that the government controls how much can be grown, and that the right to grow goes with specific plots of land that can be

rented to others at high prices, means tobacco has been woven into the fabric of the Eastern North Carolina and the lives and culture of its people. Storied for its labor-intensive production process, tobacco has produced generations of hardworking people who fiercely defend the crop despite its many critics. But as tobacco has fallen on relatively hard times, so have certain parts of the region that are most tobacco dependent.

A historic dependence on the farm way of life and the rich and productive quality of the land means agriculture will remain important to the East. Nonetheless, the region continues to develop its infrastructure to support a more diverse economy, including a mix of low-skill and more sophisticated manufacturing. Two interstate highways traverse Eastern North Carolina, I-95 running north to south and I-40 running east to west. State ports at Morehead City and Wilmington support the region's commerce, as does the 317-mile North Carolina Railroad, which links Morehead City to the Piedmont region of the state.

Despite a stubborn problem with illiteracy, the East also is about education. Five public universities—East Carolina, Elizabeth City State, Fayetteville State, the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington call the region home, as do a number of private colleges and 27 branches of the state Community College System.

And perhaps the most important ingredient in the Eastern North Carolina mix is a basic natural resource—water. Rivers such as the Alligator, the Cape Fear, the Lumber, and the Neuse sweep slowly toward the sea, growing from tiny backwaters to vast swaths of waterscape as they progress. These provide home to broad varieties of fish and fowl, acres and acres of waterfront property, and incredible opportunities for waterborne recreation, including boating, sailing, water skiing, and, of course, fishing. At the end of all this flowing water is the Atlantic Ocean, where sandy beaches lay like a lace collar along the North Carolina coast.

To the delight of some and the chagrin of others, these beaches have been broadly discov-



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ered. Some of the fastest growing counties in the state—those with actual oceanfront footage—are located in the East. This has led to a building boom of some magnitude as counties like Brunswick, Carteret, Currituck, Dare, New Hanover, and Pender seem to grow by double digits every year (in reality it's only about half that much). The prosperity doesn't spread far inland, however, as North Carolina's only three counties that are losing population are also in the East, some of them—like Bertie and Washington—featuring beautiful waterfront property of their own. Easterners attribute this population drain to lack of economic opportunity in some parts of the region. Though less robust than much of the rest of the state, the prosperity picks up again in mid-sized cities such as Eliza-

beth City, Fayetteville, Goldsboro, Greenville, Kinston, New Bern, and Wilson.

And though Eastern North Carolina, as a region, is clearly less prosperous than the rest of the state, there is a healthy level of pride. The locals may insist that the shag was invented at Atlantic Beach, or that the East Carolina Pirates are the best Division I college football team in the state, but if you really want to start a fight in this neck of the woods, try putting red sauce on pit barbecue. Everyone down East knows the princely pork deserves only vinegar and pepper. Serve it up spicy, like the region itself.

—Mike McLaughlin

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